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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Professional Development Center at Fitchburg State College, one of the nine colleges of Massachusetts' system of public higher education. The Center's mission emphasizes outreach to public schools in the area. Its tenets include: principles and goals of the whole system must be described and understood before meaningful change can occur; systems are affected from the bottom up and from the top down; instruction cannot improve systematically without administrative support; the relationship of the individual unit to the whole must be defined and be able to be transformed; change must be defined and understood from within the system; professional development programs can facilitate and help systems articulate and focus their needs (but do not define them); the most effective professional development programs respond to carefully defined needs of the systems; and effective school systems recognize the relationship between local choices and the effects of the choices on the nation and the world. This paper examines in detail six categories that implementation of the model falls into: special programs; conferences; systemic, district-based training, program support and followup, and leadership on current issues. For each category, the paper discusses the issue and presents the Center's response. (SM)

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Professional Development at Fitchburg State College: A Model for the 21st Century

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In the February 6, 1999, issue of the *New York Times**, Diane Ravitch, research professor at New York University and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, takes a hard look at the academic standards and methods of assessment of those standards in the state of New York, especially as they affect the meaning of the NY Regents Examination and the low passing rates (20% overall, in many city high schools less than 5%) of high school seniors. Looking at the achievement of students from the point of view of success rates on this examination is pretty bleak. It put me in mind of the struggle that we are experiencing in our own state of Massachusetts as educators, in both the public and private sectors, work towards implementing the tenets of the Education Reform Act of 1993. Educators in the state are presently nearing the end of the first five-year cycle, looking toward the second cycle and perhaps, most important, grasping the implications of education reform for the 21st century. Goals 2000, the theoretical construct of reform at both the state and national levels, finds itself in the throes of transition to the 21st century, heartbeats away from the present moment. How can we measure the effects of our efforts in the state of Massachusetts, and will what we see look as bleak as the results that Diane Ravitch reports to be entrenched in New York?

The plan for education reform in the state of Massachusetts is based on developmental, interconnected phases, which, once initiated, build on and enhance each other. The law was implemented in phases, each of which comprised various components, e.g., time and learning, block scheduling, curriculum frameworks, assessment, teacher mentoring, project-based learning, teacher certification, to note major parts of the plan. These and other tenets of the law required re-thinking of how we teach. No area has been more affected, however, than that of teacher certification: the abolishing of life time teacher certification and the requirements for re-certification of teachers every five years has mandated a radical shift in the standard conception of professional development for teachers and administrators.

Before 1993, professional development for teachers was based on a general sense that teachers would improve pedagogy and increase the knowledge base through the taking of graduate courses or workshops that met individual needs. Choices were highly individualistic and personal. Unlike other professions, such as law or medicine, where expectations have long been clearly, even rigidly defined, the teaching profession had not evaluated its approach to keeping current AS a profession. As a result, the

*Ravitch, D. (1999, February 6). "Higher, but hollow, academic standards." *The New York Times*, A29.

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profession had not worked out a cohesive plan, which integrated individual, professional needs and interests with the systemic needs of the school districts in which teachers worked. The Education Reform Act of 1993 changed all that. Education reform looked at systems: the school district as a system comprised of schools with different needs (elementary, middle, high), teacher/administrative teams within those schools and individual teachers in specific classrooms with, again, different kinds of needs. Encouraged and required by the principles of education reform, school districts began to look at the different parts of their systems, how they fit together and affected each other, and how the choices teachers made for professional advancement affected the classroom, the team, the school, and, finally, the district as a whole. Once the principle of system began to drive educational vision, the old concept of exclusively individual choice—professional development for enrichment and personal, professional enhancement-- became obsolete.

Fitchburg State College, one of nine colleges in the Commonwealth's system of public higher education, had established the Professional Development Center in the early 1990's, before education reform became law. Thanks to the visionary leadership of its graduate deans and college president, the college understood, based on its history of excellent teacher training programs, that the public school system was in trouble and that though the form change would take in the schools was not clear in 1990, one focus on school improvement would assuredly include life time teacher training and continued adult learning. Like many professional development organizations that provided good programs in the early days (for example, the Alliance for Education in Worcester, MA and the Merrimack Education Center in Chelmsford, MA), the Center offered workshops and graduate courses on topics of current interest to teachers, especially leadership issues. The mission of the Center was focused on outreach to the public schools in its geographic area. It sought membership from public school districts; member district representatives had input into programming and development of a vision for the improvement of instruction.

The staff of the Center was small but highly skilled. Equally important, the staff understood how systems worked and, in consultation with its district advisory committee, developed a vision of professional development that integrated the principles of systemic change upon which the concept of education reform in the state was built. In 1993, the change in the conception and purpose of professional development

seemed sudden, and was experienced in that way by many professionals across the state, but due to its strategic planning and thinking, the Center was able to respond rapidly to the new law. It implemented a professional development model, which incorporated the principles of systemic change into implementation of school re-structuring, required for all districts.

The original Fitchburg State College professional development model was based on sound principles of how systems change and how adults learn. This model continues to function in essentially similar ways today. Its tenets are:

1. The principles and goals of the whole system must be described and understood before meaningful change can occur.
2. Systems are affected from the bottom up, and from the top down, as different parts of the same process.
3. Instruction cannot improve systemically without administrative support.
4. The relationship of the individual unit to the whole must be defined and able to be transformed.
5. Change must be defined and understood from ***within***, rather from without, the system.
6. Professional Development programs can facilitate and help systems articulate and focus their needs, but do not define need for them.
7. The most effective professional development programs respond to carefully, accurately-defined needs of the systems.
8. Effective school systems recognize the relationship between local choices and the effects of those choices on the nation and the world.

What does this theoretical vision of professional development look like in real life school systems? The implementation of the model falls into six major categories. While the Professional Development Center manages hundreds of projects each year, we have provided examples in each category by way of illustration of each.

1. Special Programs
2. Conferences
3. Systemic, district-based training
4. Program support and follow up
5. Leadership on current issues

6. Support and training for administrators

Special Programs

The Issue

In the spring of 1998, the first administration of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) occurred in grades 4,8 and 10 across the Commonwealth. The MCAS is designed to measure how effectively school curricula have been aligned with the Curriculum Frameworks and how well children have acquired the skills they need to solve problems and manipulate the content in new situations. The results of the first testing were less than ideal across the state, and in central Massachusetts, uneven to weak, depending on the school and the system.

Public school districts bear the burden of responsibility for analyzing test data and designing a plan for improvement of test scores; as the higher education partner and outreach arm of the college, the Professional Development Center's mission is to support the districts and help them develop ways to achieve their short and long term goals. The process was initiated with fact finding sessions with principals, teachers and PDC staff, begun as soon as the testing was finished and before anyone had data on the results. We projected problems in the areas of mathematics and English Language Arts (both of which were supported by data released in the fall), and we identified in general student populations that we hypothesized would have had great difficulty with the test. The group focused on the need for individual instruction, student mentoring, opportunity to practice skills, test taking strategies, among many items. Time was identified as a major factor: how to continue to teach the curriculum without falling behind while at the same time extending to students in need additional instruction. After school programs, Saturday schools, cost of staff, motivation of students and other issues were identified as parts of the challenge.

The Response

As a result of these preliminary sessions, the Professional Development Center staff and district partners have looked to state of the art technology as part of the solution for students at risk of failure. It is presently designing a program that will be implemented in three phases: first, with the establishing of a Homework telephone Hotline, which students can call from home after school on an 800 number to get help from certified teachers with their homework. Homework help will be immediately available for day-

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to-day kinds of questions and homework problems; second, the group is designing a program that, when complete, will provide an interactive web site to teachers and administrators for use with students who have been identified as having difficulty with MCAS. The site will be built on a sophisticated diagnostic assessment system that will give teachers information on the academic strengths and weaknesses of each student, changes in skill level as students receive additional instruction, along with the kinds of remedial action required to continue to improve performance. To the end of achieving these goals, the Center has convened business partners, educational organizations and school districts who, as collaborative partners, have applied for a U.S. Department of Education technology grant for innovative practice in the area of remediation awarded to strategic plans that demonstrate a creative use of technology to help students at risk. The technology portion of the plan will be implemented over a five-year period . Meanwhile, each of the partners has committed funds, time and personnel to the initiation of the project. The Professional Development Center is the convener and manager of the collaboration in response to the focus identified by the district group.

Conferences

The Issue

The challenge of time management is not new but teachers and administrators have become increasingly frustrated with how little time they have to accomplish their goals. Teachers experience a great deal of isolation from their peers who teach in other districts and with whom they have little opportunity to share their experiences or benefit from the successes or failures of their colleagues. District superintendents asked the Professional Development Center to look at this problem and suggest ways for districts to collaborate on projects that would address these areas of concerns.

The Response

The Professional Development Center sponsors several large conferences each year, including a three-week Institute for the training of Advanced Placement teachers in collaboration with New England Regional Offices of the College Board, and a three-day conference for vocational/technical educators.

Its most ambitious major project is ***Diversity on Common Ground: Best Practices,*** an annual conference in March of each year that brings together a collaboration of teachers and administrators from

12-20 public school districts, over 30 private and parochial schools, educational collaboratives, community leaders and legislators for a day of sharing of best practices by practitioners. The goal of the conference is to celebrate the diversity among educators at all levels who share common values and goals and who enrich one another by sharing successful practice. Over 2,500 teachers and administrators participate in over 300 workshops, all presented by teachers, at Fitchburg State College and three of its district schools, participate in focus groups, coffee discussions, lunch, and exhibits. State and local legislators visit workshops and are available to discuss educational issues at various points throughout the day. Highlights include opportunities for professional/collegial discussions; for example, Physics teachers talk to Physics teachers, World Language teachers look at strategies for implementing block scheduling, 4th grade teachers look at how the MCAS long composition is evaluated, Middle school teachers look at team building. Perhaps the single most valuable aspect of this project is the provision of an opportunity for teachers who teach the same disciplines to meet, talk about their problems, and seek creative solutions through looking at things from a different perspective. The Professional Development Center manages and directs this collaboration.

Systemic, District-Based Training

The Issue

In the spring of each year, the director of professional development programs meets with the curriculum director and professional development coordinator of each of its member school districts. This visit occurs in a context of many such discussions that occur throughout the year, but it is in the spring that districts assess the successes of the year and identify goals of the upcoming academic year. During these discussions, requests are made for summer training, graduate courses, series of workshops or other kinds of training that the district wishes to offer for its own staff, designed to meet their particular school re-structuring needs and focusing on the specific forms of problems that challenge their own districts.

The Response

Having gathered data, needs, and challenges from each of its 22 districts and 30 private and parochial schools, a plan is developed for each school district, along with the projected services that the Center will provide and the connection to other providers that it will make. For example, one large, rural school district identified a need for training in the understanding of learning styles and how multiple

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intelligences affect teaching strategies. Several years ago, the first training was offered in the form of a graduate course in Multiple Intelligences. The course was offered three times during the academic school year at two different sites within the districts. Over 100 teachers participated in the three courses. The next year, an intermediate course, which built on the principles of the first, was offered. About 65 teachers participated. In addition, monthly focus groups led by teachers were formed at the elementary, middle and high school levels. The purpose of the groups was to offer support to teachers who were attempting to develop teaching strategies in line with learning styles. Teachers who regularly participated in the groups identified areas where more training was needed. Often, an entire course was not needed but rather refresher mini-sessions or focused discussions on narrow topics were more appropriate. We anticipate that this project will continue to evolve over the next several years. The Professional Development Center arranges for as well as facilitates and manages this multi-faceted program, all parts of which grow out of the needs of the participants as defined by the goals of the district as well as their own professional requirements.

Program Support and Follow Up

The Issue

Programs, whether in the form of graduate courses or series of workshops, change systems only when they are interconnected with the day-to-day experience of the classroom and the school. We discovered early on that individual teachers who become excited by a teaching strategy, for example, cannot affect change without the collaboration of his/her team, crucial members of which are the principal and superintendent. Administrators who support training of their staffs for school improvement understand this very well and demonstrate their support through a commitment to such practitioner conferences as described above. Meeting the need for continual support throughout the school year, however, remains a challenge.

The Response

The Professional Development Center provides support for any of its courses or other kinds of training at the request of participants, usually in the form of monthly focus groups. The groups are normally held at area schools for the convenience of participating teachers and are facilitated both by

original instructors/trainers as well as by teachers. For example, during the present academic year, focus groups are meeting monthly on rubric development, portfolio assessment, and world language teaching. The Center supports its Advanced Placement Institutes through Internet links to all the summer participants. While teachers presently prefer to meet face to face, lack of time is a challenge. To meet this challenge, the Center is exploring ways to establish internet-based, local discussion groups on topics that have been offered in its member districts.

Leadership on Current Issues

The Issue

As one of the primary interfaces between the college and the community, the Professional Development Center has developed collegial relationships with many local organizations and businesses, each of whom plays an important part and has a stake in the improvement of education. It is through these relationships that the Center has been able to bring together collaborations for grants, such as the technology grant described above, and for the support of major community projects, such as the development of the Technology Mall, a joint project of Fitchburg State College, the city of Fitchburg and local business partners, in progress. At times, educational and community leaders have identified the necessity for leaders to have a formal opportunity to look at local problems as they affect various parts of the community and to create a forum within which they can begin to identify solutions.

The Response

In October 1997, the Professional Development Center convened a broad-based group of educational administrators, legislators, community leaders, teachers, college faculty and collaborative partners in an Education Summit. The purpose of the summit was to examine the relationship of higher education to education reform in the state of Massachusetts and to identify ways that the disparate groups could work together to create what has been called a "pre-K-16" educational system.

Over 200 participants assembled for a day's discussions with state leaders and legislators; they participated in small focus groups, which looked at specific problems in the role of higher education, especially in undergraduate teacher preparation. They brain-stormed a series of possible approaches to developing solutions. A formal white paper was produced and sent to every legislator, superintendent,